

# Engaging Youth in Decision-Making Process via New Media: A Case of Rural and Urban Youth in Marginalized Communities in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the outcome of a study, which investigates the way in which youth in marginalized communities utilize new media to participate in the decision making process. It aims to identify issues commonly raised by the rural and urban youth. Data gathering for this study involves three phases – conducting focus group discussions with 51 participants from five states in Malaysia, developing new media portal for youth, and organising five intervention programmes involving 393 rural and urban youth of marginalized communities in Malaysia. The findings show that the youth are more interested to voice out issues related to social aspects, particularly issues related to quality of living. Other issues are freedom of speech and rising cost of living. However, there are also some differences in terms of the issues raised by the rural and urban participants, which are discussed at length in this paper. This study highlights the need for the government to take into account various issues raised by the youth in the decision and policy-making processes.

**Keywords:** new media, social media, youth inclusion, media use, marginalised communities

## I INTRODUCTION

The marginalization issue could have an impact on the level of youth participation and engagement in public decision-making (Hourcade, Bullock-Rest, & Schelhowe, 2010). However, the emergence of new media and affordable mobile phones and computers has potentials of minimizing this problem. Many youth are now able to own the technology. In the context of Malaysia, there is an exponential growth of mobile phone ownership. In 2014, it was reported that there were 43,248,000 mobile phone subscriptions with a penetration rate of 144.2 per 100 inhabitants (SKMM, 2015). Out of these, 50 per cent are smart phone users. This shows that the gap in terms of access to technology among Malaysian citizens is small. Taking this into account, mobile phone can be a good platform for youth in marginalised communities to participate in the policy and decision making process. With the emergence of new media and popularity of mobile phones, youths have better

opportunities to exercise their rights and engage in the civil society.

In relation to this, a study was conducted to investigate the way in which new media is utilised by youth in marginalised communities to participate in the policy and decision making process. This study focuses on two main issues – potential use of new media for youth to participate in civil society and key issues of concerns among rural and urban youth in the marginalised communities.

This paper starts with a discussion on the youth and media participation, and the motivation and justification of the study, followed by the method used to achieve the objectives. Next is the presentation of the findings which include the key issues raised by the youth and the differences of issues of concerns between youth in the rural and urban areas. The paper will then conclude with a discussion on the outcome of the study.

## II YOUTH AND MEDIA PARTICIPATION

Age is the key component in defining youth. However, researchers have different views regarding the age range that can define youth. Henceforth, in the context of this research, the age range defined by the United Nation is used. The United Nation defines youth as those between the ages of 15 to 24 (UN Factsheet, 2013a). Youth at this age range make half of the world's population. The UN report in 2013 shows that about 225 million youth, or 20% of all youth in the developing world, are “idle” – not in education, employment or training (UN Factsheet, 2013b). Their participation in nation building, political process, and civic engagement are still low (UNDP, 2012; Golombek, 2002).

Consequently, the youth are demanding equality to exercise their full rights as citizens to participate, engage, and voice opinions on issues affecting the nation (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). They want to be heard and to be consulted in the process of developing the national agendas particularly those related to education, politics and economic issues. In lieu of this, there is a need to study the extent of which new media can play a role in enhancing the participation of youth in nation building.

### III DATA GATHERING

Five focus group discussions involving 51 youths were conducted separately in five states in Malaysia - Kelantan, Kedah, Selangor, Johor and Sabah. These states were selected to represent five different regions in Malaysia namely Northern region (Kedah), Central region (Selangor), Southern region (Johor), Eastern region (Kelantan), and Sabah/Sarawak. The main focus of the discussions was to ascertain the participants' opinion regarding the potentials of new media usage among youth and to identify key issues affecting youth in the marginalized communities. A set of guidelines was developed for the focus group to ensure that the objectives were achieved. Video recording and note taking were used to collect the data, after which thematic data analysis was conducted to analyse the qualitative data.

Based on the analysis, 15 issues (four economy, three politics and eight social) were identified. This finding is used as a basis for developing a new media portal named Youth4Malaysia. The portal provides three new media tools namely WebTV, WebRadio, and Web journalism for youth to participate and voice their opinions in the issues and areas, which are previously identified via the focus group discussions.

Once the portal was completed, five intervention programmes were conducted involving 393 rural and urban youth of marginalized communities in several geographical locations in Malaysia (Northern, central, southern, eastern, and Sabah and Sarawak). These intervention programmes are trainings being provided by the researchers to instill the basic skills of using the three new media tools on the participating youth. Once they know how to utilise these tools, the participants developed their own contents for the WebTV, WebRadio and Web journalism (i.e. articles). The materials were then uploaded onto the portal's server for assessment and review purposes. In addition, all users of the portal were encouraged to view and comment on the content.

The content uploaded by the participants was then analysed to identify the key issues raised by them. Feedback and comments by viewers of the content were also analysed. In addition, the researchers also analysed whether there are any differences in the issues raised by youth in the marginalized communities in the urban and rural areas. This finding may be imperative especially for the government and policy makers to determine the relevancy and effectiveness of the youth development programmes.

### IV KEY ISSUES OF CONCERNS

Table 1 shows a list of key issues identified by the youth during the focus group discussions. Social category has the highest number of issues (eight

issues), which include hobbies, sports, health, beauty, arts and entertainment, crimes, racial issues, current social issues, and quality of living. This is followed by the economy category, which are hot economic issues, business, jobs, and cost of living. Politics has the lowest number of issues (only three), which are – current political issues affecting the nation, economic stability, and the gaps between rural and urban.

**Table 1. Issues of concerns identified by Youth**

NO	Politics	Social	Economy
1	Current political issues	Hobbies	Hot economic issues
2	Economic stability	Sports	Business
3	Urban and rural gap	Health and Beauty	Jobs
4		Arts and Entertainment	Cost of Living
5		Crimes	
6		Racial issues	
7		Current social issues	
8		Quality of living	

### Participation in WebTV

Table 2 shows WebTV submissions by category and by rural and urban youth in marginalized communities. There are a total of 71 WebTV clips being submitted, out of which 64 (90 percent) are under social category. This means that the participating youth in both rural and urban area are more interested in social aspect rather than politics and economy. Surprisingly, majority of the clips are related to quality of living issues (40 percent by rural and 33 percent by urban youth). This clearly indicates that the youth especially those who live in rural area are expressing their views on the need by the government to improve quality of living especially among the youth in Malaysia. In addition, the youth especially those who live in urban area (19 percent of the submission), are also expressing their concerns regarding the rising crime rate. This is another important area, which should be taken care of by the government. The urban youth are also submitting considerably high number of clips on issue related to hobbies, health and beauty.

**Table 2. WebTV submissions for politics, social, and economy category by issues and youth group**

Category	Issues	Qty	Rural	Urban
Politics	Current political issues	1	1	0
	Political stability	2	1	1
	Freedom of speech	3	2	1
	<i>Sub Total</i>	6	4	2
Social	Living quality	23	9	14
	Crime issues	11	3	8
	Hobbies	9	2	7
	Health and beauty	6	1	5
	Current social issues	6	3	3
	Arts and Entertainment	4	2	2
	Racial issues	4	2	2
	Sports	1	0	1
	<i>Sub Total</i>	64	22	42
Economy	Hot issues	0	0	0
	Business	1	1	0
	Jobs	0	0	0
	Cost of Living	0	0	0
	<i>Sub Total</i>	1	1	-
	<b>Total</b>	71	27	44

### Participation in Web Journalism

Table 3 presents submissions of Web journalism materials by the participants. Surprisingly, the portal received more submissions in this category (139 contributions) compared to WebTV (71 contributions) and Web Radio (28 contributions). There are some interesting findings from the analysis. For politics category, more than 50 percent of the articles are related to freedom of speech. This indicates that the participants in both rural and urban areas perceive that youth should be allowed more freedom to express their opinion in the political issues particularly those, which have an impact on youth. Nonetheless, participants from rural area are also expecting the government to maintain political stability in the country. This is evident when 19.2 percent of the submitted articles by this youth group discussed political stability issues.

In social category, there is a clear difference between the two youth groups on the issue of living quality. Participants from urban area seem to pay more attention on this issue where 42.6 percent of the 54

articles submitted describes the need for the government to upgrade the living quality of the youth in the poor family in the urban area. In line with this, the youth in the rural area are concerned with the issue of rising cost of living. In the economics category, 80 percent of the submitted articles by this youth group reveal the hardship they are suffering due to the rising cost of living in the rural area.

**Table 3. Web Journalism submissions for politics, social, economy category by issues and youth groups**

Category	Issues	Qty	Rural	Urban
Politics	Current political issues	12	7	5
	Political stability	6	5	1
	Freedom of speech	22	14	8
	<i>Sub total</i>	40	26	14
Social	Living quality	27	4	23
	Crime issues	7	2	5
	Hobbies	11	5	6
	Health and beauty	5	1	4
	Current social issues	9	1	8
	Arts and Entertainment	11	5	6
	Racial issues	1		1
	Sports	1		1
	<i>Sub total</i>	72	18	54
Economy	Hot issues	12	1	11
	Business	4	0	4
	Jobs	1	0	1
	Cost of living	10	4	6
	<i>Sub total</i>	27	5	22
	<b>Total</b>	139	49	90

Based on the analysis of user views, articles in the economy category which are related to quality of living, receives the highest views/reads compared to the other two categories. This indicates the importance of this issue among the participants and the users (readers) of the portal.

### Participation in WebRadio

Table 4 presents the statistics on WebRadio submissions. Most of the submissions were made by the urban participants (i.e. 71.4%). Again, the trend shows that the participants are more interested in the social and economy issues rather than politics. Urban youth in particular, submitted their radio clips on social issues related to hobbies, health and beauty, and Arts and Entertainment. None of the rural participants submitted their clips in this category.

Similar number of submissions was made by the rural participants for the economy issues (i.e. hot economy issues, business, jobs, and cost of living). A notable difference to the statistics of WebTV was found whereby urban youth are more concerned regarding freedom of speech and the rural youth are more interested in political stability.

Despite low number of submissions in the political category, these WebRadio clips received commendable views/ hits. In fact, two of the clips submitted in this category are the top two mostly viewed among the portal users/ visitors. The highest is the clip on current political issues (543 views), followed by the clip on freedom of speech (490 views). This shows that despite the low interest among the participants to submit their works on political issues, the users and visitors of the portal are more interested to follow on these issues. Unfortunately, further analysis on the portal users or visitors cannot be conducted due to limited information on their backgrounds.

**Table 4. Web Radio submissions for politics, social, economy category by issues and youth category**

Category	Issues	Qty	Rural	Urban
Politics	Current political issues	2	1	1
	Political stability	1	1	0
	Freedom of speech	1	0	1
	<i>Sub total</i>	4	2	2
Social	Living quality	-	-	-
	Crime issues	-	-	-
	Hobbies	1	0	1
	Health and beauty	2	0	2
	Current social issues	0	0	0
	Arts and Entertainment	1	0	1
	Racial issues	0	0	0
	Sports	0	0	0
	<i>Sub total</i>	4	0	4
Economy	Hot issues	2	1	1
	Business	1	0	1
	Jobs	1	0	1
	Cost of living	2	1	1

	<i>Sub total</i>	6	2	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>

## V DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Youth exclusion in the decision making process is a global issue which has long been debated. This is more apparent among the youth group who are living in the marginalized communities. The outcome of this study indicates that new media can indeed be a good platform for the youth to participate and voice out their opinions regarding various issues affecting their welfare. This is in line with several other studies such as Hopkins (2010) and Hourcade, Bullock-Rest, and Schelhowe (2010), which also highlight the positive impact of new technology on youth engagement in politics, social and economy. This study also reveals the fact that when attempting to tackle issues involving youth, the government and relevant authorities need to differentiate between youth in the urban and rural areas. It appears that issues of concerns for these two groups may differ due to different living conditions, neighbourhood and lifestyle.

This study provides evidence on the importance of new media as platform to bridge the gap between the government and relevant authorities with the youth in the marginalized communities. Consequently, it can minimize the youth exclusion problem, which as it is commonly known, can hinder the nation's progress.

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